BOOM

introductory writings on nihilism

by aragorn moser

BOOM

Nihilism, anarchy, and the 21st century

Anarchy and nihilism: consequences

By Aragorn Moser
2013

Pistols Drawn, an imprint of LBC Books
Published by Aragorn Moser
Layout by Leona Benton
Printed at “The Compound”
1818 Carleton St. Berkeley, CA 94703-1908

Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21st century

Anarchy and Nihilism, Consequences

nihilism anarchy and the 21st century

introduction

This pamphlet about nihilism is intended for an anarchist audience. Throughout the course of compiling this there was a certain temptation to preface sentence after sentence with "From an anarchist perspective" or "As an anarchist" because my evaluation of this subject material comes from an anarchist orientation. I resisted repeating such a pedantic statement over and over again within these pages but I would remind the reader that the assumption holds.

A few notes about the narrative arc that I intend here. My intention is to expose anarchists (who might not be otherwise) to the breadth of the nihilist contribution. I have gone further afield than I generally would. Normally I would be satisfied providing threads that an engaged reader could follow on their own, without making the connections that seem obvious to me. I generally see my

writing as living within the context that it does and therefore do not spend a lot of time explaining why I have arrived where I have.

Here I have made different choices. I begin with a lengthy discussion about the history of nihilism. I am not a particular fan of the facts, names, and dates that make a useful history, but I made an exception in this case because I believe that the information should be accessible to more people than just those who are willing to slog through the many books on the subject that I have. With that said, I have made many errors of omission. If I ever do decide to write a book on history, it may very well be on nihilism, because the amount that I left out of this brief history still weighs on my mind.

I then provide some thoughts on the connection, or lack of connection, of nihilism to the socialist tradition. I will say, even though I will regret saying it later, that part of my intention is to approach certain topics with a

stronger language than the current left or not-left discourse. I make the issue about socialism. I have included a previously published essay that makes a first pass at drawing out connections between nihilism and action in-this-world that may be useful to those eager to develop conclusions along these lines in real-time. Finally I have included a recent rant that will serves as an exclamation point to this pamphlet and a comma to our discussion about nihilism and anarchy.

—Aragorn!
contact: aragorn@riseup.net

a history of russian nihilism

An understanding of the Russian nihilism of the 1860s begins with an attempt to understand the concept of nihilism. This is naturally difficult because if there is a word that has even more loaded, and negative, connotations than anarchism it would be nihilism. This is particularly because the primary vehicle of our modern understanding of nihilism is through the fiction of Turgenev and Dostoevsky. Neither of these authors were particularly sympathetic to nihilism and provided nihilist characters primarily as a frame with which to drape their morality tales. The version of nihilism offered by these authors is then, primarily, a snapshot of the popular culture in which nihilism dwelt as much as it is a recollection of the trend. This time in Russian history is part of the story of nihilism and will be part of the story in bridging the gap between the mythological Bazarov, Verkhovensky, or Raskolnikov and

figures like Nicholas Chernyshevsky, Dmitry Pisarev, and to some extent Sergey Nechayev.

What then was nihilism? Nihilism was a youth movement, a philosophical tendency, and a revolutionary impulse. Nihilism was the valorization of the natural sciences. Nihilism was a specific fashion style. Nihilism was a new approach to aesthetics, criticism and ethics. Nihilism was the contradiction between a studied materialism and the desire to annihilate the social order. Nihilism was also a particularly Russian response to the conditions of Tsarist reform and repression. Nihilism has become much more than it originally would have been capable of because of the viral nature of its value-system, practice, and conclusions. Nihilism's effect is traceable through the history of Anarchism, through the formation and modern practice of terrorism, and through philosophical trends from deconstruction to existentialism.

Russia in the mid nineteenth century was

a place of increasing tension. The revolution of 1848 that touched most of the European continent did not drastically affect Russia. As a result of the Russian campaign to subdue Napoleon (1812-1815) western ideas were brought to Russia. These ideas most clearly articulated themselves as a desire for a constitution defending values like human rights, a representative government, and democracy.

When the Tsar (Alexander I) died in 1825 a regiment of soldiers refused to pay allegiance to the new crown, wanting instead the establishment of a Russian constitution. These westernized Russians were particularly frustrated because the colony of Poland was awarded a constitution by the Tsar. The 'Decembrists,' as they were called, were suppressed and remained a symbol of the possibility of social change throughout the century. Alexander's successor, his brother Nicholas I, was an autocrat. He ruled Russia (1825-1855) with a combination of secret police (the

Third Section), censorship, nationalism, and colonialism. After the failure in the Crimean war against the combined might of the Ottoman Empire, Britain, and France, Russia was in the dire situation of being forced to make major reforms or no longer be considered a player on the European continent. The timing of this military failure by Russia coincided with the death of Nicholas I.

His son, Alexander II, assumed the throne (1855-1881). His reign began with the negotiation of a peace deal with the major powers of Europe and a major domestic reform. Alexander II, in the sixth year of his reign, freed the peasants. This meant that as a class the peasants became "transformed into a class of independent communal proprietors" which meant that they had rights far beyond any other peasantry in Europe. This reform was coupled with changes to the military, judiciary, and local self-governance. This spirit of change was dampened

by the comparison of the transformations not to the past, but to a mythological state. This sets the stage for nihilism.

The New People, as they were called, existed before the publishing of the book *Fathers and Sons* (1862) by Turgenev but found a hero in the character of Bazarov. It is worth noting the role of literature in Russian culture. Prose rose to prominence in the 1840s as the rise in publications of literary journals that printed novels in serial. This form affected Russian culture so dramatically that Alexander's emancipation of the peasants is attributed, in part, to his reaction to Ivan Turgenev's collection of *Sportsman's Sketches* that depicted the life of the peasant. Literature was a respected form of social commentary that broached issues from the generation gap (in *Fathers and Sons*) to the psychology of men and women under great duress (Dostoyevsky) and in daily life (Tolstoy). This style of literature became known as realism due to

its unflinching portrayal of contemporary life. The realist novel portrayed the experience of what was happening in Russian culture and in the 1860s that was nihilism.

Foundational Nihilism

Russian nihilism can be dissected, perhaps unnaturally, into two periods. The foundational period (1860-1869) where the 'counter-cultural' aspects of nihilism scandalized Russia, where even he smallest of indiscretions resulted in nihilists being sent to Siberia or imprisoned for lengthy periods of time, and where the philosophy of nihilism was formed. The other period would be the revolutionary period of Nihilism (1870-1881) when the pamphlet *The Catechism of a Revolutionist* inspired the movement-in-waiting into a movement-with-teeth with dozens of actions against the Russian state. The revolutionary period ends, of course, with the assassination of the Tsar Alexander II (March 13th,

1881), by a series of bombs, and the consequential crushing of the nihilist movement.

It is arguable that Mikhail Bakunin's (1814–1876) "Reaction in Germany" (1842) with its famous dictum "Let us therefore trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!" both anticipated and instigated the ideas of the nihilists. Bakunin was considered, in Russia, a Westernizer because of his influences by the thinkers of the day from the Continent proper. In "Reaction" Bakunin engaged with the Hegelian view by asserting that the negative, and not the positive, is the creative driving force of dialectics. While he is inexorably linked to both the foundational and revolutionary periods of nihilism, Bakunin was a product of the earlier generation whose vision, ultimately, was not the same as the nihilist view. He stated this best as "I am

a free man only so far as I recognize the humanity and liberty of all men around me. In respecting their humanity, I respect my own." This general humanitarian instinct is in contrast to the nihilist proclamations of having a "hate with a great and holy hatred" or calling for the "annihilation of aesthetics" (Pisarev).

Nihilism was never a singular, or even a particularly disciplined, body of thought. This is attributable to the reality a) that the main nihilist philosophers (Chernyshevsky and Pisarev) never held academic positions, b) that publishing was heavily censored under the Tsar or, as is most likely, c) of the nature of nihilism itself. Nihilism never had enough momentum, enough time, or the right conditions to become a mature philosophy. This resulted in it being an approximation to a body of ideas rather than a body of ideas. While strong positions were taken along several theoretical lines, none were developed in the generational method necessary for these

ideas to hold historical purchase. While natural science was seen as the most potent intellectual tool, more nihilist commentary was made in the field of aesthetics, this being related to the obscurity principle. The obscurity principle says that in times of repression the most cogent social commentary happens in the vehicle of fiction, where your intention is 'obscured' because you appear to be talking about something entirely different than you are. In the case of the nihilists, art was anathema because it aggregated sentimentalism, emotionalism, irrationalism, spiritualism, and was a waste of resources. This obscured the fact that nihilists were actually talking about the values of the current order embedded in the vehicle of art but this connection couldn't be made more clearly in a context of censorship.

As a positive philosophy Nihilism took positions within the framework of established philosophy. Nihilist materialism boiled

down to the view that "only what is perceptible exists". Man, then, was "a complex chemical compound, governed strictly by the law of causality." Ethics, as argued by Chernyshevsky and Pisarev, can be described as the 'scientific' justification for hedonism. The nihilist position on epistemology was realist and contrary to the phenomenalism of the time. Art was valuable in direct relationship to its 'social usefulness', however that is defined (which it was not). As these positions reflect, Nihilism was not at its strongest as a positive philosophy and due to the transformation of Nihilism from a position to an action there was never a particularly focused development of these ideas.

As a matter of course, nihilism became a more coherent position only in banned texts, smuggled into Russia from émigrés. The most prolific of these émigré's was Alexander Herzen (1812-1870) who established the Free Russian Press in London where he pub-

lished until his death. The Press was well known for its publications of radical literature that ranged from To the Younger Generation (1861), that argued for the replacement of the Tsar by an employee of the state, to the journals *The Polar Star* and *Voices from Russia*. His most well known journal was *The Bell* which was smuggled into Russia where it was quite popular through the foundational nihilist period by those who desired social reform. In hindsight his views were rather conservative, especially in light of what nihilism would become. From *The Bell* in 1865, "Social progress is possible only under complete republican freedom, under full democratic equality."

It is as a political position that nihilism attracted attention and was transformed from a discussion between learned men into a social movement. Nihilist politics begin as a branch of the Socialist tree. They were most influenced by the French Socialism of the

time, Charles Fourier (1772-1837), Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), Auguste Comte (1798-1857), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), and obscure German materialists (Buchner, Moleschott, and Vogt). The nihilist contribution to socialism in general was the concept that the peasant was an agent of social change (Chernyshevsky, A Criticism of Philosophical Prejudices Against the Obshchina (1858)), and not just the bourgeois reformers of the revolutions of 1848, or the proletariat of Marx (a concept that wouldn't reach Russia until later). Agitation for this position landed Chernyshevsky in prison and exile in Siberia for the next 25 years (although the specific accusations with which he was convicted were a concoction) in 1864. The first group, inspired by nihilist ideas, to form and work towards social change, did so as a secret society and were called *Land and Freedom*. This groups name was also taken by another, entirely separate group, during the Revolu-

tionary Nihilist period. The first *Land and Freedom* conspired to support the Polish independence movement and to agitate the peasants who were burdened with debt as a result of the crippling redemption payments required by the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Polish independence was not of particular interest to the nihilists, and after a plot to incite Kazan peasants to revolt failed, *Land and Freedom* folded (1863).

Thus begins the first period of nihilist secret societies. *The Organization* created a boy's school in a Moscow slum in order to train revolutionaries. In addition they had a secret sub-group called *Hell* whose purpose was political terrorism, with the assassination of the Tsar as the ultimate goal. This resulted in the failed attempt by Dmitry Karakozov on the 4th of April 1866. Dmitry fired a revolver, but had his arm jostled by an artisan (who died, before the potential assassin, of the excesses of drink as a result of his change of so-

cial status) at the last minute. Dmitry was tried and hanged at Smolensk Field in St Petersburg. The leader of *The Organization*, Nicholas Ishutin, was also tried and was to be executed before being exiled to Siberia for life. Thus ended *The Organization* and began the White Terror of the rest of the 1860s.

The White Terror began by the Tsar putting Count Michael Muravyov ('Hanger Muravyov' due to his treatment of Polish rebels in prior years) in charge of the suppression of the nihilists. The two leading radical journals (*The Contemporary* and *Russian Word*) were banned, liberal reforms were minimized by reactionary afterthoughts, and the educational system was reformed to stifle the revolutionary spirit that lived there. This action by the Russian state marks the end of the foundational period of nihilism.

The lifestyle of the nihilist, or New People, is worth reviewing, if for no other reason, because of its similarity to youth movements of

the modern era. While advocating for a callous hedonism and radical subjectivity, in practice nihilists actually tended towards a utilitarian and ascetic lifestyle. The fashion is a case in point. "Both sexes favoured blue-tinted spectacles and high boots. Other common features were a heavy walking-stick and a rug flung over the shoulders in cold weather; they called it a plaid, but it was not necessarily a tartan." (Hingley) This, coupled with huge beards for men and bobs for women, a voracious appetite for cigarettes, an unwashed dirty appearance, and rude and outspoken behavior made the New People a sight to behold. The nihilists attempted to challenge the values of the day in a more meaningful way too. At the time, the question of woman's emancipation was of great interest to reformers. For the nihilist the issues were regarding work and sexual freedom. Because a woman's passport (which was used for general travel and not just travel abroad) was legally

controlled by men—a father, or husband, had ultimate control of a woman's life. The nihilists solved this problem by having 'fictitious' marriages. This allowed for an emancipation of women de jure if not de facto. This resulted in women having the freedom of mobility to pursue some academic pursuits (which were curtailed during the White Terror) and some enterprise. Finally, the nihilists adopted the credo that adultery was a natural, and even desirable trait, in contrast to the spirit of their time, or their own cultural composition (i.e. they were prudes).

More influential for the New People than philosophy, or political texts, was literature. The expression of the tension between generations by Bazarov in *Father's and Sons* as the rejection of the romantic and idealistic postures, guaranteed his position as an icon of the nihilist movement. This was even though Turgenev's intention was to portray the New People in a less than flattering light.

The publication of Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* (1863), which was written in prison, became the guiding light to the movement. Within its pages was a vision of the socialist values of the nihilist, an exposition of how to live with radical values intact, and how to practice nihilist nonmonogamy. The power of literature on the movement is ironic because, of course, most of our modern understanding of the nihilist movement comes from the novels of Turgenev and Dostoyevsky. While Turgenev was non-judgmental in his depiction of the New People (and respected by the nihilists, Chernyshevsky having held correspondence with him), Dostoyevsky was in violent reaction to them. While Dostoyevsky was involved in radical activity against the Tsar in the 1840's, during his exile in Siberia he became a Orthodox Christian, upon his return he became quite upset at nihilism in general and Chernyshevsky specifically. The last five novels of

Dostoyevsky dealt with nihilism to some degree either centrally or as a major theme.

Revolutionary Nihilism

The entrance on the scene of one person symbolizes the transformation from the foundational period to the revolutionary period. Sergei Nechaev, the son of a serf (which was unusual as most nihilists came from a slightly higher social class, what we would call lower middle class), desired an escalation of the discourse on social transformation. Nechaev argued that just as the European monarchies used the ideas of Machiavelli, and the Catholic Jesuits practiced absolute immorality to achieve their ends, there was no action that could not be also used for the sake of the people's revolution. "His apparent immorality [more an amorality] derived from the cold realization that both Church and State are ruthlessly immoral in their pursuit of total control. The struggle against such powers must there-

fore be carried out by any means necessary." (Cleaver) Nechaev's social cache was greatly increased by his association with Bakunin in 1869 and extraction of funds from the Bakhmetiev Fund for Russian revolutionary propaganda.

The image of Nechaev is as much a result of his *Catechism of a Revolutionist* (1869) as any actions he actually took in life. The Catechism is an important document as it establishes the clear break between the formation of nihilism as a political philosophy and what it becomes as a practice of revolutionary action. It documents the Revolutionary as a very transformed figure from the nihilist of the past decade. Whereas the nihilist may have practiced asceticism, they argued for an uninhibited hedonism. Nechaev argued that the Revolutionary, by definition, must live devoted to one aim and not allow for distractions of desire, compassion, or feelings. Friendship was contingent on Revolutionary

fervor, relationships with strangers was quantified in terms of what resources they offered revolution, and everyone had a role during the revolutionary moment that boiled down to how soon they would be lined up against the wall or when they would accept that they had to do the shooting. The uncompromising tone and content of the Catechism was influential far beyond the character of Nechaev. Part of the reason for this is because of the way that it extended nihilist principles into a revolutionary program. The rest of the reason was that it gave the revolutionary project a macho weightiness that the men 'of the sixties' did not have.

In terms of what the Catechism offered nihilism, a quote:

> By "revolution," our Organization does not mean a regulated pattern in the classical, western sense, a movement that always stops and bows with respect before private

> property rights and before traditions of public order and so-called civilization and morality—one which until now has limited itself to overthrowing one political form to replace it with another that tried to create a so-called revolutionary-state. The only revolution that could be beneficial for the people would be that revolution which destroyed at its roots any elements of the state and which would exterminate all the state traditions, social order, and classes in Russia. (Thesis 23, *Catechism of the Revolutionary*)

Nechaev appears to be attempting to bridge the gap between Machiavelli and a nihilistic anarchism in this thesis. This, beyond anarchist hand-wringing to the contrary, is a sobering take on what horrors may be necessary for the abolition of the standing order. Which is not to say that there is much

to reclaim from the personality of Nechaev in general. The facts are clear. Nechaev imagined a secret revolutionary organization *the Russian Revolutionary Committee*, with himself as the fugitive member from which he was taking refuge in Geneva, where he met Bakunin. Bakunin, an admirer of Nechaev's zeal and stories of his organization's success, provided contacts and resources to send Nechaev back to Russia as his representative (he gave him the number 2771) of the Russian Section of the World Revolutionary Alliance (also an imaginary organization). Upon his return to Russia Nechaev formed the secret, cell based organization, People's Vengeance. One student member of the organization, Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov, questioned the very existence of the Secret Revolutionary Committee that Nechaev claimed to be the representative of. This honest appraisal of Nechaev's modus operanti required action.

> On the evening of 21 November 1869 the victim was accordingly lured to the premises of the Moscow School of Agriculture, a hotbed of revolutionary sentiment, where Nechayev did him to death by shooting and strangulation, assisted without great enthusiasm by three dupes... Nechayev's accomplices were arrested and tried. (Hingley)

Upon his return to Switzerland Nechaev was rejected by Bakunin (for most of the obvious reasons) and was eventually extradited back to Russia where he spent the remainder of his life at the Peter and Paul Fortress. He did, due to his charisma and force of will, continue to influence events, maintaining a relationship to People's Will and weaving even his jailors into his plots and lies. He was found dead in his cell in 1882 under mysterious circumstances.

Among the revolutionary movement (nihilist or not) in the post-Nechaev period there was a clear division. This split was between the propagandists (who followed Russian émigré Peter Lavrov who published *Forward!* in Paris) and what was called the Bakuninists who believed in pushing the peasants into immediate social revolution. The focus of both groups was on 'organizing' the peasants. This included a Russian version of 'Freedom Summer' (which actually stretched to two years 1873 and 1874, the second of which was coined 'mad summer') where young men and women, in groups of 3 and 4, traveled to the rural villages to live, work and agitate among the peasants. This was inspired, in large part, by the belief that the Russian institution of the village commune was the shortest path to Russian socialism. The commune was a self-governing body that managed some village affairs and made decisions collectively.

The rural effort was a complete failure. The peasants often handed the nihilists over to the police before even getting a sense of what they were around for. The nihilists 'disguised' themselves as peasants with the unsurprising result of being entirely obvious from the moment they walked into a village. Furthermore, the concept of rural revolt was a-historical at the least, as the peasants did not have the ability to arm themselves in a meaningful way and did not actually have a tradition of successful uprising. The Russian, Ukranian, and Cossack revolts in the 17th and 18th centuries were quickly suppressed. The only near-success, which began before the nihilists arrived on the scene, was in the Chigirin area on the River Dnieper near Kiev. In 1877 three revolutionaries, Stefanovich, Deutsch, and Bokhanovsky, drafted a charter purporting to come from the Tsar calling on the peasants to take up arms—which they did, in the form of (antiquated)

pikes, other farming equipment and a body of peasants one thousand strong. Hundreds of peasants were arrested and sent to Siberia, and the three nihilists were imprisoned in the Kiev gaol in what became known as the Chigirin affair.

A preliminary note on the role of women in the nihilist organization is in order. While, given their tenuous social gains under Alexander II, women were less easily convincible to join the project of dismantling society, once engaged were, if anything, more committed to action, violence, and seeing the project through, then their male counterparts. This is best exemplified by the direct taking up of arms during the revolutionary period beginning with the action of one woman, Vera Zasulich. Once the taking up of arms and the formation of secret societies was in full swing, women took no small part in the proceedings. An accounting in the *People's Will*, the most famous of the nihilist secret

societies, states that one quarter to one third of the organization were women. Nearly half of the Executive Committee were women. While the social mores of the culture that the nihilists came from were not entirely upset, which meant that there was still 'women's work' - namely housework and typesetting, on the whole women had egalitarian relationships with the men.

There were many secret societies formed in the revolutionary period. Two of them, the *Troglodytes* and the *Revolutionary-Populist Group of the North* eventually settled into forming the second iteration of *Land and Freedom* in 1876 (although the name was not settled until 1878). This group resolved itself as firmly in the Bakuninist camp in reaction to the failures of the rural campaigns of years past. The notable events of the seventies originated in this reaction.

In December of 1876 there was a political demonstration in the Square of Our Lady of

Kazan in St. Petersburg. When the police broke up the meeting they arrested, and convicted to 15 years of prison, a latecomer to the protest, a known revolutionary named Bogolyubov. He then, in an unexplainable act of intransigence, refused to take off his cap for the visiting General Trepov who was reviewing the prison he shared with the political prisoners of the trial of '193'. The infuriated General beat him on the spot and demanded he be flogged the next day, which was done with such vigor that Bogolyubov went mad. This resulted in a prison riot.

Bars of cell windows were torn off and beaten against the doors, and prisoners were reputedly tied up by warders, beaten, kicked and hauled unconscious to the punishment cells. Outside the prison Trepov's act created widespread indignation by no means confined to professed revolutionaries. A Russian gentle-

> man's honour was especially sensitive where the striking of blows was involved, and so Bogolyubov's punishment was taken as a monstrous affront to the whole revolutionary movement, staffed as it very largely was by young people who retained certain social pretensions. (Hingley)

Vera Zasulich was not personally acquainted with the principle actors but took it upon herself to take action. She sought an audience with the General in a reception room of Russian officials where upon she drew a revolver from her muff and fired, killing him. In an unexpected move the regime allowed for Zasulich to be tried by a jury, assuming that because she confessed to the act, they had the weapon, and there were witnesses, that the result was guaranteed. Instead the jury acquitted her and upon leaving the courthouse, where the police awaited her for additional

arrest, a small riot occurred resulting in her being whisked away by her comrades. This act, and the accompanying scandal, launched a several-year wave of action from the nihilists against agents of the state, and attempts, mostly failed, at repression by the state.

In January of 1878 the Odessa police raided the printing press of Ivan Kovalsky who defended himself and his press with revolver and dagger (thereby creating a tradition of nihilists fighting it out till the end with the police) while his comrades burnt incriminating documents and attempted to incite the crowd gathered around for the spectacle. Kovalsky was eventually captured, tried, and put to death as the first Russian political execution of the time.

On the first of February, 1878, a police infiltrator was killed by revolutionaries, and a note informing the public of the execution was posted in Kiev, bearing the seal of the Executive Committee of the Russian Socialist

Revolutionary Party (an imaginary organization). On the 23rd of February, Valerian Osinsky a nihilist from the south, shot the public prosecutor of Kiev twice. The victim was unhurt (perhaps due to the thickness of his fur coat). On May 25th, Gregory Popko stabbed to death Captain Geyking of the Kiev gendarmerie on a corner of the main thoroughfare of the city, and then escaped by fatally shooting a doorkeeper who tried to stop him and wounding a policeman. Michael Frolenko, a southern nihilist, became an employee of the 'impregnable' Kiev gaol and quickly rose to the rank of chief warder. On May 27th he walked Stefanovich, Deutsch and Bokhanovsky (of the Chigirin affair) out of the prison walls where they spent a week on the Dnieper River rowing to safety.

The northern nihilists began catching up to the exploits of the southerners in August. At nine o'clock in the morning on one of the main streets of St Peters-

> burg, Sergey Kravchinsky walked towards General Mezentsov, Chief of Gendarmes and Head of the Third Section, who was on the way to his office. Kravchinsky held a dagger lightly wrapped in newspaper; after passing the General, he thrust it in his back and twisted it, then leapt into a carriage drawn by Barbarian, a famous trotter, and escaped. (Hingley)

This was particularly notable because it happened two days after the state's execution of Kovalsky.

Governor General Dmitry Kropotkin in Kharkov, cousin to Peter Kropotkin, was shot on February 9, 1879, by Gregory Goldenberg. Also in February of that year was the death of another police infiltrator and another gun battle with the police in Kiev. April 2nd was the attempted assassination of the Tsar by Alexander Solovyov who fired, and

missed, five times; the Tsar suffering nothing more than a hole in his outer coat. Solovyov was hanged on May 28.

Repression over the next eight months was severe: sixteen Nihilists were hanged throughout Russia including fourteen in the region of Kiev. Remarkably, the only three nihilists (Popko, Kravchinsky, and Goldenberg) who actually killed people escaped the scaffold. Popko escaped, Kravchinsky escaped to London (to be run over by a train) and Goldenberg hung himself after confessing his crimes to a fellow 'revolutionary' (actually police agent) who was planted in the cell with him. On the 20th of February 1880, a nihilist named Miodetsky took a shot at one of the two Governor Generals in charge of the repression, Governor General Loris-Melikov. Once again he missed his shot and was executed two days later. Nihilists made up in enthusiasm what they lacked in marksmanship.

This state repression raised the question,

in stark terms, of the effectiveness of *Land and Freedom*'s strategy. In June 1879, they held a conference to evaluate the group's methods of violence. This resulted in the dissolution of *Land and Freedom* and the creation of *Black Repartition*, which held that militant propaganda was the appropriate method for moving forward, and the *People's Will,* which condemned the Tsar to death. *Black Repartition* exits the stage as they leave the arena of direct contestation with the state, but they are of note as the location of George Plekhanov, the most notable Marxist of the time and up to the period of 1905.

Before the exposition of the final act of the Russian nihilists play, it is worthwhile to take pause. Beyond just assassination plots and reading literature, the nihilists were engaged in what they believed was a deep challenge to all aspects of Russian life. Along with atheism, non-monogamy, bank robbery (with several tunneling episodes to their

credit), and forgery (especially of the 'passport' documentation that served as the Russian's primary identification papers) the nihilists lived in communal apartments with people their own age, sharing resources, and devoting their lives to 'the cause'. The state made attempts to infiltrate the nihilists; in return the nihilists also infiltrated the state. Their subterfuge of the Kiev gaol has already been mentioned, but far more significant was the nihilist by the name of Nicholas Kletochnikov, who actually infiltrated the secret police (the Third Section), feeding the nihilists names of informers, locations of planned raids and copies of official seals. The popularity of the secret society gave the nihilists a degree of seriousness that doesn't exist in the more 'counter-cultural' parallels to their lifestyle today, but the attempts at living both within and against the current order continues to be popular in the same way.

The last act of the Russian nihilists

After the dissolution of *Land and Freedom, People's Will* devoted themselves to the assassination of the Tsar. They did not see this death as linked to a larger social struggle. They did not have the infrastructure, social solution, or desire to assume power, and believed that the institution of the Russian autocracy was firmly in place. Their desire was not a *coup,* it was vengeance. The nihilists also held on to the belief that if their positive actions towards social change (like their organizing of the peasants) were so easily thwarted by the malevolence-of-neglect by the state than negative action (like assassination) would more likely result in substantive change in the system. Finally there was a fatalist and deeply-held belief that destruction was worthwhile for its own sake, and not because of humanitarian, political, or social reasons.

After assessing the failures of nihilist sharpshooters the decision was made to attack the

Tsar with demolitions. In November of 1879 the nihilists attempted to mine the train route that the Tsar would take from Livadia, on the Crimean coast near Yalta, to St. Petersburg at three different points. The first was made near Odessa, organized by Vira Figner, and involved the attempt to insert a nihilist into the position of railway watchman, but when the Tsar took a different route this plan was abandoned. The second happened just outside Aleksandrovsk and involved an intricate plan of nihilist Andrei Zhelyabov (1850-1881) to portray the launching of a tannery business by day and to plant dynamite by night. When the train carrying the Tsar came through the explosives refused to ignite. The final point was organized, by Alexander Mikhaylov, near Moscow. It involved the renting of an apartment a mere fifty yards from the rail line, the digging of a tunnel from the apartment to the line and the setting of the charge at the train line. Naturally this plan sounds better on pa-

per than in practice. The digging involved several more people than the neighbors believed lived in the apartment, which prompted the response to the queries about the household's food consumption to be levied against a legendary cat and not a group of nihilists digging a tunnel to assassinate the Tsar. As with most tunnel digging, disposing of the dirt from the tunnel involved a system of dragging the dirt out of the tunnel and into a spare bedroom and then scattered through the yard at night. Naturally the land through which the tunnel lay was sandy and easily flooded resulting in an entirely miserable experience. As they approached the tracks the deafening sound of each passing train confirmed each diggers worst suspicion that they were about to be caved in upon. Naturally the train containing the Tsar was not the one derailed by the firing of the explosive; the only casualty was the Tsar's jam from his Crimean estate.

As no nihilist was captured and the explosion was a close call there was a general consensus that this was the right approach. The next attempt was made at the Tsar's Winter Palace on the 5th of February 1880. It involved a nihilist taking a job within the palace, smuggling amounts of dynamite into the cellar, and at the appropriate time igniting this explosive, taking out the guard's quarters in between. Once again the timing of the action was off. The scheduled arrival of the Tsar was delayed which meant that the explosives went off prior to Alexander's arrival. Eleven people were killed and fifty injured. The next attempt involved the submersion of a hundredweight of explosive under the Kamenny Bridge on the Catherine Canal, which the Tsar had to pass to travel to the train station, which was thwarted by the tardiness of one of the conspirators. Another attempt began as the ambitious mining of a road that the Tsar would pass from the harbor to the train in Odessa.

When the Tsars travel plans changed the effort was abandoned.

The rest of 1880 found the nihilists concerned with tracking the traveling arrangements of the Tsar. They found that Sunday was the best day to strike, as the Tsar usually followed the same route to and from the military reviewing grounds. It was on the corner of the Nevsky Prospekt and Malaya Sadovaya Street where the nihilists would strike. This involved renting an apartment, digging a tunnel and attempting to act like proper citizens. Their failure to convince their neighbors resulted in a raid on their premises by an inspecting party who did not happen to notice the piles of wet earth covered by straw and coke. On the 27th of February, Zhelyabov, the organizer of the operation, was arrested—which almost brought down the operation.

After the Tsar reviewed the troops, on March 1st, he visited his cousin the Grand Duchess Catherine. This meant that he would

not likely travel the intersection where the nihilist plot was focused and instead required the use of the small (five pound) homemade hand grenades that were prepared for such a possibility. Four nihilists put themselves into position; two were able to launch their bombs, the second catching and killing both the Tsar and Ignatei Grinevitski, who threw the bomb. Five members of the plot to assassinate the Tsar were ceremoniously hung on April the 3rd, wearing a placard stating 'Tsaricide'. Those hung included Andrei Zhelyabov, Nicholas Rysakov, Sophia Perovsky, Nikolai Kibalchich and Timothy Mikhaylov. Their hanging was not by the dropping of the floor, or the breaking of their neck, but by the slow suffocation of those hung. The deaths took such a long time, and were so public, that the result was a loss of face for the regime.

Thus ends the period of Russian nihilism. The heir to the throne of Russia, Alexander III (1884-1894) was an autocrat in the old

style, brutally suppressed any remaining nihilists who dared show themselves after the fall of the Tsar. He believed in ruling the empire by 'nationalism, Eastern Orthodoxy and autocracy' with which he was successful until his death. At which time his son Nicholas II took the throne to be toppled by the Russian Revolution of 1917.

That nihilism has continued to be an overlooked branch of the socialist tree is surprising given the innovations of the movement. Beyond just the nihilist approach to social change, which has clearly been influential far beyond the socialist tradition, is the systematic way in which nihilists attempted to extend their ideas beyond just their politics. Given the repressive environment in which their ideas flourished, the breadth and scope of the Russian nihilists continue to bear the fruit of committed individuals bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Bibliography

Hingley, Ronald. *Nihilists; Russian radicals and revolutionaries in the reign of Alexander II, 1855-81,* New York : Delacorte Press, [1969, c1967]

Edie, James M. and Zeldin, Mary-Barbara, ed. *Russian Philosophy*, Vol. II, University of Tennessee Press [March 1994]

Encyclopedia Brittanica 2003

Marshall, Peter. *A History of Anarchism*

Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*

Broido, Vera. *Apostles Into Terrorist: Women and the Revolutionary Movement in the Russia of Alexander II*, New York: The Viking Press.

what is left?
nihilism
vs.
socialism

The history of socialism is a noble tradition. It has been an epithet used by tyrants to curse their enemies and a flag by which working people transformed their workplace and the societies that they lived in. Almost every story we hear of someone standing up to authority involves socialism. It is the valiant story of individuals and groups who attempted to transform the status quo of their time against overwhelming odds. Socialism has changed peoples' expectations of rights, fairness, work, and the kind of leadership they should expect.

On the one hand, socialism has completely transformed society over the past two hundred years. More than just the revolutions that have had some success in various parts of the world under a socialist flag, socialism can be directly credited for the existence of unions that defend workers rights, a universal education system in most parts of the world, a general health care system (especially in

many Western countries), and a system that hybridized elements of State protectionism and laissez fair capitalism.

On the other hand, socialism has been an abject failure. Socialism has never usurped Capitalism, in a meaningful or long lasting way, as an economic system. Most socialized systems of care balance the cruelty of benign neglect with the indifference of the queue. Even Libratory Socialism concerns itself primarily with navel gazing, the cacophony of the mob or the selfishness of the individual. Socialism has served better as a corrective to a world-system than it has as the transformation of one system for another.

The family tree

Socialism comes out of a historical lineage of ideas that stretches from the Ancient Greeks, the Polish Socinians, the Enlightenment and classic liberalism. While it is primarily understood as a political philosophy in resistance

to the status quo of the 19th and 20th centuries it actually agreed with the majority of the choices that those in power made. It agreed that aboriginal people, wherever they were found, should be integrated into the life of the society, it agreed with the rise of industrialization (with very few exceptions), and it agreed with basic economic principles (wealth, price, exchange).

The tendencies in socialism that came to be known as 'Marxist' or 'Communist' exemplify this position. The rhetoric was always that the goal was the direct and communal control of society for the common benefit of all members. The reality was two-fold. The conception of history that came out of the Marxist tradition (dialectical materialism) dictated that the transformation of society would pass through capitalism, as it had through feudalism, to transform into socialism and eventually communism. This meant that progressivism was embedded within this

(the dominant) branch of socialism. This meant (especially prior to the Russian Revolution) that the path to revolution had to pass through the industrialization of society, and that the places where industrialization was most advanced were the places where socialist revolution was most likely to occur. Imagine the surprise when the backward (industrially speaking) country of Russia became the location of the first socialist revolution. This surprise must have transformed to horror when Lenin's policy of War Communism and the New Economic Policy, which mimicked the worst aspects of capitalist extraction of value and allowed a limited return to free trade, became the baseline on which the Soviet economy was based.

To what extent did the libertarian tradition in socialism also represent this position? While the basic position of libertarian socialism seems innocuous (who could be against 'freedom' or 'liberty'?) the actual positions

taken by libertarian socialists mirror the larger socialist movement. Instead of arguing for the creation of an administrative body to manage the transformation to a socialist society, libertarian socialists argue for 'selfmanagement' in 'free federations' to deal with the question of power. Outside of the question of how practical (or often) these ideas are in a moment of contestation with the status quo is the question of what this practice means for libertarian socialists and whether this practice has informed socialism as a corrective to the worst excesses of the Capitalist system or as the correct vehicle for the transformation of society.

The primary mechanism by which libertarian socialists have practiced their socialism is by attempting to "build the new world in the shell of the old." This practice extends from the idea that the socialist society must be exemplified by our behavior today. In order to create a self-managed society libertari-

an socialists would begin by self-managing their current struggles and organizations. In addition they would connect these self-management schemes through 'federalism' that would give them the ability to engage in self-defense and share resources. Over time, and especially in the past few decades these ideas have become increasingly popular in the capitalist space. Many work places no longer organize themselves in the classic 'pyramid' structure with a boss at the top and a clear organizational structure built on top of the line worker. Instead these work places have integrated the innovation of 'selfmanagement' and allow for 'teams' to assume responsibility for the amount and form of their production. Arguably these innovations have been superficial, as the pyramid structure hasn't been entirely destroyed but the experience of the line worker has qualitatively changed. Consumer cooperatives have benefited from libertarian principles. By cutting out the profit

motive, they provide low cost services and goods to their members. By operating under principles of representational democracy there is a degree of control and participation far beyond the typical corporation. The secondary mechanism of libertarian socialist practice has been in revolutionary moments. Here it has always experienced the tension of its, ultimately, humanist perspective with the exigency of the revolutionary moment. This is best exemplified by the events in Spain where the CNT joined with the Catalan government in a common front against Franco's fascism. This decision was based on the fear of isolation by the CNT and the belief that it was a higher priority to defeat fascism than to finish the revolution. Placing the war before revolution meant, ultimately, collaboration with the state against the revolution.

If socialism has been, at best, a corrective to the worst excesses of Capitalism then where else can we draw our inspiration from?

If the mainstream of socialism (so called state socialism, communism, or social democracy) is solidly interested in the same progressive, economic assimilation as the dominant world then we could look to its rivals. If these rivals (libertarian and utopian socialists) have shown that they are co-optable or worse, that they are not capable of being effective in the time of crisis then where do we turn? If people couldn't effectively combat the system of the 19th century when it was just becoming a worldwide system rationalizing everything, including its opposition, what hope do we have today long after the fact?

Russian Socialism

One hundred years later socialism was transformed by traveling to the rest of the world. African and Arab Socialism were innovations that reflected experiences that were authentically different than the socialism of the European Continent. The problem was that

they were also directly reactionary to the Soviet Experience and were thus limited in their scope. They assumed colonialism, Marx, and a certain degree of nationalism. While these assumptions were relevant given the circumstances in which they occurred, they transformed these socialisms into purely political practice instead of more general political philosophy.

During the 19th century there was a strain of what is called socialism that, arguably, did originate outside of the mainstream of European thought. This Russian socialism prefigures Arab and African socialism in that it attempted, although by no means in these terms, to externalize the Russian experience in the vehicle of socialism. What Russian socialism had in common with European socialism was a belief in science as the means by which Christian parochialism could be challenged and by which the world could be truly understood. It also shared connection,

through Russian émigrés like M. Bakunin and A. Herzen, to the greater Socialist movement happening in Europe. This is where the similarities end.

Philosophically the trajectory that Socialism was part of, the Liberal Tradition, advocated freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of thought. Even if the mainstream of Socialism eventually took a different tack from this origin, the basis of the Socialist project was in these values. These values were not part of the Russian experience. Instead Russian socialism started from a rejection of morality, truth, beauty, love, and social convention. As a political philosophy Russian socialism begins by questioning the validity of all forms of authority and ends by practicing the adage "The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!" The Russian Socialists did not see the path to social revolution as progressive. Instead of seeing an industrial proletariat as the revolutionary

agent the Russians saw their own rural peasantry. In 1861, when the peasants were freed from servitude but chained to debt, the Russian Socialists believed an uprising was inevitable. When it did not occur, nor could be inspired to occur, the Russian Socialists took action. Instead of locking themselves up in the Library of England for ten years the Russian socialists moved into group houses with their comrades, took daring and ridiculous actions (like handing a socialist pamphlet to the sitting Tsar), and eventually committed Tsaricide. Of course, we know the Russian Socialists by another name, Nihilists.

Nihilism meet Anarchism

Not until the movement started by Proudhon had reached Russia did the "propaganda of action" come into it. In Russia the government, controlling the military, was able to check instantly any

> movement which might appear in any of the few big cities. In the country no movement could have effect. -Marshall Everett

Libertarian Socialists also had another name that may be useful to differentiate from it from its Socialist brethren, anarchism. If Libertarian Socialism is overly concerned with self-management, federations, and workingmen's associations then anarchism may very well have been concerned with how to integrate the Russian innovations of nihilism. Bakunin is the case in point. Revisionists, of the Libertarian Socialist stripe, would focus entirely on Bakunin's positive agenda of arguing for collective action to achieve anarchy; freedom of press, speech, and assembly; and the eventual voluntary associations that would federate to organize society, including the economy. They do not attend to his negative agenda of demolishing political institutions, political power, government in general, and

the State. As Bakunin provided the Nihilists with a formative gift in his essay "Reaction in Germany" (1842), he also received a gift from the practice of the Nihilist Dmitry Karakozov and his failed assassination attempt of the Tsar Alexandar II. Ten years later this nihilist practice (that was is full swing by this time) became the policy of the largest anarchist federation on the European Continent. This so called "propaganda by the deed" is the primary historical vehicle by which we know anarchism (and which Libertarian Socialists spend much of their time apologizing for and distancing themselves from).

> Terrorism arose because of the necessity of taking the great governmental organization in the flank before it could discover that an attack was planned. Nurtured in hatred, it grew up in an electric atmosphere filled by the enthusiasm that is awakened by a noble

> deed." The "great subterranean stream" of nihilism thus had its rise. From nihilism and its necessary sudden outbreaks anarchism borrowed terrorism, the propaganda of action. -Sergius Stepniak

The difference between "propaganda by the deed" and the nihilist practice of assassination is intention. The anarchists continued, due to their relationship to Socialism, to believe in a positive, progressive route toward their social ends and to be engaged in violence against heads of states and their lackeys with the (utopian) belief that the population bearing witness to these acts would both see the fallibility of power *and* would rise up to fill this void. The nihilists had no positive intentions. In the parlance of modern anarchism they only desired to take direct action against great offense.

> Anarchism and nihilism are two words familiar to the young and

> now attractive to them. They do not believe in building a new society within the shell of the old. They believe that the old must be destroyed first. That is nihilism. In a way it is the denial of the "here and now." -Dorothy Day

Let us state it clearly. The Socialist conception of history is a progressive tradition. The Marxists call it historical materialism and it is well stated, in their own language, by this quote from the Preface to Marx's *Contribution to the Political Economy.*

> No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets it-

> self only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the tasks itself arises only when the material conditions of its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.

The Nihilist concept of history was not progressive. The Nihilist's opposition to the state is just a special case of his or her opposition to almost everything: the family, traditional art, bourgeois culture, comfortable middle-aged people, the British monarchy, etc. and is not oriented around their formulation of how to achieve a better world. In practice there were plenty of Nihilists who may have desired an anti-statist communal society but did not particularly see their resistance to the regime as linked to this desire.

Socialism will continue to have its adherents, who are attracted to its perspective of history, its democratic perspective of inclu-

sion and participation, and its apparent dominance in the field of social contestation. Its criticism of Nihilism begins with the position of deep revulsion at its a-humanist perspective and practice. If we were to review the history of Socialism, we would see that a rejection of humanism is not necessary to inflict involuntary horrors upon real living people. If there is a lesson to take from the Soviet Union, The People's Republic of China, or the Khmer Rouge it is that good intentions, and the practice of historical materialism, can stack up the bodies as well as the systems they would oppose.

What Nihilism provides then is an alternative to the alternative that does not embed an idealist image of the new world it would create. It is not an Idealist project. Nihilism states that it is not useful to talk about the society you 'hold in your stomach', the things you would do 'if only you got power', or the vision that you believe that we all

share. What is useful is the negation of the existing world. Nihilism is the political philosophy that begins with the negation of this world. What exists beyond those gates has yet to be written.

nihilism as strategy

> (Nihilism) stands like an extreme that cannot be gotten beyond, and yet it is the only true path of going beyond; it is the principle of a new beginning.
>
> —Maurice Blanchot,
> *The Limits of Experience: Nihilism*

If we desire another world, what is necessary for us to do to achieve this end? Specifically what changes must we enact personally, socially, and as a movement?1 Beyond a coming-to-power, what is the task of resolving the contradictions of not only the current methodological system of social organization, but the partial solutions offered by others who would also pursue social power? To what extent must these changes happen now or can they be part of the action-as-consequence?

Here is where nihilism can provide some new perspective. A definition of nihilism[2] could be the realization "that conditions in

the social organization are so bad as to make destruction desirable for its own sake independent of any constructive program or possibility." This exposes one of the greatest idealistic flaws of modern activism: The articulation of the specific world-to-be as a result of your actions does not guarantee that world's creation.

It is the tradition of the materialist conception of history that allows for the fallacy of causality to pollute the spirit of today. If production and exchange are the basis of every social structure throughout history then we can limit ourselves to studying them to understand how any transition to another world may occur. Therefore an understanding of economic systems should suffice to understand the strategic opportunities for transition. Since the vast majority of economics is understanding the relationship of institutions (which are only accountable to the current power structure) to each other, such an analy-

sis seems like trying to understand an internal combustion engine from the motion of a car.

Materialism has largely been seen as an incomplete conception of history. This is partially due to the power structures embedded in the formation of most institutions but also due to the moral forces that challenge materialism's functionalist underpinnings. In the simple case, a benevolent God created the universe and has some vested interest in how things happen here. Therefore moral systems exist in the name of God's interests, as stated in holy texts and by fallible interpreters. Since the dispersion of the Reformation and the secularization of the rise of Science, morality is usually defined in relation to politics. This has led to the moral component to Marx's analysis and of the Left in general.

> The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties

> of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the lines of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.
>
> —Marx and Engels,
> *The Communist Manifesto*

Moral value, or 'good', is defined by the specific cultural values of Europe, of a developed Christian worldview, and the developing beliefs in individualism, meritocracy, and mercantilism. These are still the hurdles that even the most starry-eyed of protesters trip over, sometime spectacularly.[3]

Historical evidence, if it is to believed, would actually demonstrate that the visions of "successful" social revolutionaries have shockingly little to do with the form of the

new society they create. Take the French Revolution where the form of class society was to be changed. It did, from the three estates of church, nobility, and commoners to a powerful state, centralized bureaucracy, and burgeoning capitalist infrastructure. All it took was the Committee of Public Safety, a Reign of Terror, and a fifteen year Total War effort that would transform warfare forever. For the Russian Revolution many differing tendencies aspired to revolutionary victory. Its eventual leaders called for "All power to the Soviets" and ended up settling for crushing their opposition and enacting the New Economic Policy.[4] The twentieth century has ended with a steep decline in not only successful social change but also a poverty of visionaries who are pursuing change at all.

Anarchism and nihilism share a common antecedent. Bakunin's dictum "Let us put our trust in the eternal spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unsearchable

and eternally creative source of all life. The desire for destruction is also a creative desire." in 1842 sparked both movements. Nihilism's cultural peak was in the 1860s, although its activism continued almost to the early twentieth century. It is arguable that anarchists inherited propaganda by the deed from the Russian nihilists. Nihilism's theorists[5] continued to be cited as precursors to the revolutionary activity in Russia until they were 'disappeared' well into the Bolshevik regime.

What does nihilism have to offer beyond a mere avocation of destruction? The nihilist position does not allow for the comforts of this world. Not only is God dead to a nihilist, but also everything that has taken God's place; idealism, consciousness, reason, progress, the masses, culture, etc. Without the comforts of this metaphysical 'place' a strategic nihilist is free to drift unfettered by the consequences of her actions. "A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority, who does not

accept any principle on faith, however much that principle may be revered"6 Philosophically much has resulted from the nihilist ideas on value, aesthetics and practice. Most notably in Adorno's conception of Negative Dialectics, a principle that refuses any kind of affirmation or positivity, a principle of thorough-going negativity. The nihilist tradition includes Adorno, Nietzsche, Bakunin, much of classic Russian literature, Dada, punk rock, Heidegger, existentialist, post-structuralist and post-modern thinkers, and much of anarchism.

What does this really mean on the modern stage? Strategic nihilism allows for the possibility that there is no future. The possibility of radical social transformation then becomes unhinged from the utopian aspirations of its proponents. Their hope can clearly be shown to be disconnected from the social and material reality of both the society as-it-is and the potential society that-could-be. If the destruction of the current order

must be achieved, for our own potential to be realized, for its own sake, for the children, it may be better to do it with open eyes than purposely blinded ones. A strategic nihilist understands that an ethical revolution does not create an ethical society. An ethical anarchist is not one concerned with non-utopian social transformation, only an idealized one. A strategic nihilist understands that the infrastructure of the modern world embeds its own logic and inhabitants and the nihilist is willing to toss it asunder anyway.

Vaneigem states in *Revolution of Everyday Life*, that "Juvenile delinquents are the legitimate heirs of Dada." This speaks to a positive nihilism that may be a comforting way in which we can approach the troubling consequences imbedded within nihilism's logic. Anarchists have generally accepted property destruction in their humanist vision of a ethical social change. Things matter less than people. Nihilism informs us that this dichot-

omy ties us to the world we must supercede, before we are capable of actually having social relationships with people and not things. Strategic nihilism provides us a solution to existentialism and liberalism. It argues for an active pose in this world and for the inviability of reformist solutions. When confronted with the horror of your existence, race towards the bleak consequences, not away. Deal with the **moralism** explicit in your stated irrelevance by identity politics, communism, and postmodernism with a sword in hand. Moralists should be spared no patience.

What if you are struggling in 'the movement'? Nihilism can provide you a suite of tools. The first is deep skepticism. Every action, every meeting, is filled with politicians-in-waiting who are easy to discern, with their plastic smiles and fluency with 'the process'. A strategic nihilism allows its practitioner to see these types for what they are; and the ability to do with them what is nec-

essary by your analysis, and not theirs.

The second is a new eye towards history. Whereas before it may have been easy to get caught up in the details of the who's, when's and why's of the Paris Commune, now it is easy to see the failure in the partiality without getting bogged down in the specific half-measures. Time devoted to arguing how many angels dance on the head of a pin is time away from the pursuit of anything else.

Finally, a strategic nihilist position allows for a range of motion heretofore not available. The ethical limitations of 'doing the right thing' have transformed movements for social change. From pacifists and ethicists who sanctimoniously wait for the club to fall or the strength of their convictions to shatter capitalism, to adherents of the Vietnam-era form of social protest, it is clear that the terrain allowed by morality is bleak and filled with quagmire. Armed struggle groups, who led non-existent masses toward their better world

have shown similar failure. If these are not the models that frame your conception of change, you are free to make moves on a chessboard that no one else is playing on. You begin to write the rules that those in power are not prepared for. You can take angles, you can pace yourself, you can start dreaming big again, instead of just dreaming as large as the next demo, action, or war.

1. The term movement is used to provide perspective here. It is a matter of scale in Western Culture to begin with the self and end with the society. While we reject this tautology, we embrace the clarity of its apparent simplicity.
2. There are about as many definitions of nihilism

as there are of Anarchism. The difference is that to the extent that there is a social phenomenon of nihilism it is largely regressive and insular. Anarchism has puppet shows, nihilism only has black coffee and cigarettes.

3. When that explosive detonated yesterday it broke all the windows in the family's house. I was in the process of being served tea and playing with the two small babies. I'm having a hard time right now. Just feel sick to my stomach a lot from being doted on all the time, very sweetly, by people who are facing doom. I know that from the United States, it all sounds like hyperbole. Honestly, a lot of the time the sheer kindness of the people here, coupled with the overwhelming evidence of the wilful destruction of their lives, makes it seem unreal to me. I really can't believe that something like this can happen in the world without a bigger outcry about it. It really hurts me, again, like it has hurt me in the past, to witness how awful we can allow the world to be. I felt after talking to you that maybe you didn't completely believe me. I think it's actually good if you don't, because I do believe pretty much above all else in the importance of independent critical thinking. And I also realise that with you I'm much less careful

than usual about trying to source every assertion that I make. A lot of the reason for that is I know that you actually do go and do your own research. But it makes me worry about the job I'm doing. All of the situation that I tried to enumerate above - and a lot of other things - constitutes a somewhat gradual - often hidden, but nevertheless massive - removal and destruction of the ability of a particular group of people to survive.
-Rachel Corrie (to her mother)

4. "This policy was initiated in 1921 to replace the policy of War Communism, which had prevailed during the Russian civil war and led to declines in agricultural and (non-military) industrial production... a policy of substituting a tax instead of requisitions; of allowing the peasantry to dispose of their surplus within the limits of "local trade"; of allowing the development of capitalist concessions to a delimited extent, and of state capitalism. This state capitalism, in industry and agriculture, was allowed a considerable field of possibilities in which to develop, while the proletarian government retained control of the key industries, state banking; that nationalization of the land remained and that the state held a monopoly of foreign trade." *Encyclopedia of Marxism*

5. Chernyshevsky, Pisarev, and Herzen

6. Ivan Turgenev's 1861 novel *Fathers And Sons*

what i wish i had said september 12 2001

Today, March 11, 2004, there was another major bombing in Madrid, Spain. The 'facts' in the case are still coming out (12 hours later) but it appears that the eye of accusation is envisioning the event as an Al Quaeda plot. The first twenty four hours of mainstream news coverage after the September 11 attacks was an interesting glance behind the curtain. Not only were there reports (that I never heard followed up on) of there being additional attacks on government buildings in DC, but the blame for the attacks was all over the map: kind of a who's who of America's shit list.

The coverage then from the anarchist and left press was typically onedimensional, as the initial response to the new Spain attack appears to be also. An example is in order. The report begins with a round or two of humanist hand-wringing, all about the children, the terror and how targeting 'innocent' people is

no way to change the world. Then come the limp accusations about state terror. "How come we are forced to write this lament against the civilian population by a group without a state when the State does really bad things too. The State is even worse than the topic of my moralistic diatribe!" Then there is a point or two about bad policies and how, if there were anarchy, or justice, or whatever-in-the-fuck, this would never have happened. The report is wrapped up with the sober analysis about how we should change the world by changing the fundamental problem and not 'play the same game' as those with missile technology and a standing army.[1]

It is as if there were a central committee writing these things, press release style, making sure that no one is off script. There is no possible way that anyone could believe that there are people fighting a war against the system, people who I may not wish to win, but who am I to judge. Until the day that I

take up arms against the state, resisting the enemy on the only field that it understands, I am going to keep my mouth fucking shut about the correct or incorrect ways to fight the totality…

I am not going to tell you about how my eyes are running with tears because of all the children who will not be coming home to parents tonight. My eyes are dry. They are not dry because of the greater crimes of the United States, or Spanish governments. Sure, their crimes are legend, but if I were to cry today about this one crime, what possible chance could I have to ever stop crying. This is the world I live in. If I am not going to burn myself to ash I have to deal with yet another headline about consequences as exactly what it is- people died in the course of a total war where one side has very few options at its disposal with which to attack domination.

My question is, to what extent will there ever be resolution to the Wars of Terror? Just

as we know the pattern of behavior of the non-participant analysts of this latest action, we also know the behavior of the system itself. Of course there will be increased repression. Of course the ETA (the Basque separatists who were initially accused of the crime but may end up being off the hook for this action) will be crushed. More allies will join on to the American-lead War against Terror. More money will be spent that will result in a higher degree of examination into our personal lives and greater amount of militarization of our society. This cycle will repeat until either the entire social apparatus collapses under the weight of its own repressive infrastructure OR there is total conformity under our compassionate overlords. I am betting on the former.

To defend acts of 'terror' would be to choose to spend an endless period of time debating points of history, philosophy, and values - to what end? I am not convinced

that lashing out against the State in media savvy public displays of violence has much connection at all to dismantling it. If I knew that it did, I would use this opportunity to beg your action along this line, or at the very least to ask you to tape me up for my run at the prize. Moreover I am suspicious that what is being presented to me as reality isn't the half of it.

I may not be a believer, and will not be a beneficiary either way, but I also do not think that the conclusion to this 'total war' is going to be anything like we suspect it is going to be. Revolutionaries, of every stripe, have been remarkably, consistently, wrong about the consequences of their behavior. What I do believe is that the radical action taken by a very few individuals today strike more awe in me than terror. *The cognitive, spiritual, and a-humanist leap taken on a train in Madrid, much like the one taken by fifteen hijackers in 2001, has more value to add to an understanding about*

what a revolutionary practice is going to look like in the 21st century than a thousand black blocs or a million demonstrations against the state and for the cameras.

1. These thoughts courtesy of the 'anarchist' writer anarcho at http://anarchism.ws/writers/anarcho.html

anarchy
and
nihilism
consequences

introduction

This is the second in a series of pamphlets that draw connections between the tradition of the political nihilist tendency of 19th century Czarist Russia and current anarchist thought.

As *Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21st Century* (the first pamphlet in the series) raised the question of what relevance nihilism has to anarchy it could be argued that these essays beg the opposite question. What does anarchy have to offer nihilism?

That the range of anarchists includes the clowns from protest alley, micrometer-toting specialists of oppression-identification, and Marxists who wear black flags isn't a condemnation of anarchist ideas but *is* a significant reason for pause. In that pause we have to challenge our assumptions about

anarchy. What do we really share with others in the big tent (or should it be called a circus tent) of anarchism?

These essays are increasingly specific. Perhaps this will give more people a toe-hold so that they scale their own heights. At the end of these essays there is a specific invitation.

There have been several opportunities for me to speak on nihilism over the past two years. What has been surprising in that time hasn't been the apparent antagonism but the quiet interest and excitement. It is still unclear how this interest is going to materialize into a discrete practice, but I won't be alone in answering that question.

Aragorn!
PO Box 3920, Berkeley CA 94703

consequences:

on revolutionary despair

A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority, who does not accept any principle on faith, however much that principle may be revered. -Arkady

1. There is not a liberating vision for humanity. Every so-called revolutionary at best fails and at worst establishes yet another fiefdom. The rhetoric of liberation makes for great bedtime stories, keeps starry-eyed dreamers warm at night, and should be seen for exactly what it is. Charlatans either believe that they speak for the oppressed and that the weight of their opinion is greater because they summon the power of representation, or that they are the first ones to come up with the ideas that they have.

2. The idea of a singular, recursive, or iterative approach to positive social change works better in a classroom than in lived experience. The kind of social science that results from these explorations resembles a secular monotheism. As an organization of society, or a modeling of the transformation of society, apocalypse has a long track record and it is entirely reactionary. This is to say that whether called an insurrection, a revolution, a singularity, or a collapse, a similar thing is intended: more of the same.

3. Is the quiet misery of daily life preferable to a reactionary rupture? The lesson of the German Revolution (1918-1919) is the lesson of historical Anarchism: glorious failure. Whether it is France, Spain, Germany, or Russia the story of social revolution has not been one of

triumph. Instead, and at best, it has been a set of stories about moments worth living.

4. How many lives are we willing to sacrifice for our moment? Shall we stack them for barricades? Fill the trenches with them after the tanks roll in? Use their blood to write the history books that tell of our glorious time?

5. Nechayev did not tell us how to be good people. His concept of an army, or even a secret society, of revolutionary supermen is laughable, but perhaps the reason for laughter isn't immediately clear. Lenin was clear how much the Catechism influenced his thought. It was *The Prince* for the revolutionary set. The Catechism provides a moral roadmap, an action plan that has demonstratable results. List your human targets in order of their crimes, harden

yourself, and eliminate these targets in order. The greatest criminals are the first eliminated.

6. Psychology has made the role of superman an embarrassing one. The social milieu of radicalism only allows room for sensitive inhuman success stories. Broken people are highly favored as long as they are broken along the lines of survival and politeness. The Nechayevs of today fade out of sight after no greater crimes than petty larceny and broken hearts. The Machiavellis implement simple strategies to make sure the supermen stay occupied with irrelevancies.

7. Revolutionary strategy is a failure from the perspective of providing a mechanism to get from here to there. This is not to say that there is not the possibility of wide social transformation but that to the extent that it follows the lead of the

glorious losers (anarchists), Nechys, or Micheals of the past it will fail in succeeding either on its own terms or on the terms of being a liberated social change.

8. This is not to say that we are free or satisfied. We are at an impasse. This impasse is one part frustration at the rhetoric of transition available to us (without words it is hard to understand where one is or where others are), another part anger at the grinding death of a denatured daily life and another part ennui at the futility of our social or political power. Without the ability to control our own life, political action, and social relationships, our vivid imagination lay fallow. There is nothing to eat here but a gray paste that keeps us alive. But for what?

9. This problem extends to the west gener-

ally. We understand that past formulations are out of date. We lack for new ones.

10. New efforts are being made but they are orthogonal to the approach of the humanist West. They are, to put it gently, more severe than the values and theory of modernity allow for. They are, ultimately, goal-less. These are actions that are interpreted by others but move so rapidly as to be entirely chased by the mullahs, fatwas, and analysts. These new efforts are the language of the disenfranchised humanity. There is no hope. There are only casualties.

11. The suicide bomber is the muse of our time. They do not inspire us to sing of freedom, justice, and dignity but of consequence.

nihilism
and
science

A decent chemist is twenty times
more useful than any poet
-Bazarov

The history of nihilism is of a moment in time. Russia in the 1860s was a suffocating place. The majority of the population were serfs breaking under their new freedom (to make pay-ments to their former lords by de-cree of the Czar in exchange for working their land) or choking under the superstition and conservatism of the Orthodox Church. Russia was also at a crossroads: having proven itself among the great empires of Europe after the defeat of Napoleon it also found itself an intellectual backwater. Very little of the de-mo-cratic unrest that had affected the Conti-nent had conse-quence in Russia. Even Czar Alexander II's dramatic move of freeing the serfs was more motivated by his romantic sensibility after having read Turgenev's "A

Sportsman's Sketches" than an urge to transform Russian society.

As a consequence of this environment historic nihilism embraced positions that we could largely understand as reactionary rather than as intentional. (This is something that is endemic to revolutionary traditions and, arguably, should be included in their definition.) Given how short the life span of the historic nihilist period was (spanning both the foundational and revolutionary period) it is hard to imagine what the consequence of a rigorous universal skepticism would have been if it had had the time to develop and transform. What would a group of people with nothing to lose have been capable of?

If philosophy is the practice of tilling the earth then it is no wonder that most thinkers spend their time wandering overturned soil searching for lost seeds and replanting. If nihilism was the political philosophy of skepticism in a time when society was framed by

the Orthodox Church and Czarist regime it's no wonder that it left very little room for tradition. If the Church represented spiritualism, superstition and sentimentality then a philosophy for the modern time would have to reject all of these things. If the Czar represented the ossified autocratic bigotry of a monarchy then freedom would have to be the progressive, democratic republicanism of France. This is the limitation of parochial skepticism.

Eventually we make a choice

The history of science is a semantic journey through eras. Science was once concerned with the formation of the world along with how we should live in it and was indistinguishable from Philosophy. The terms were synonymous. Later there was fragmentation: understanding the world through experimentation and sense perception (empiricism) became a discipline distinct from understanding

the world through reasoning (Rationalism). This dialectic was resolved in the scientific world by Newton's combining of the axiomatic proof with the mechanical discipline of physical observation resulting in the system of verifiable prediction that largely remains intact.

Science became a codified and bureaucratic process that involved the relationship between the practitioners of science, financiers of science, and an increasing number of Scientific Societies (post-16th century). The role of a Scientist became distinct from that of one who sought knowledge about the natural world. A Scientist was one who both went through training that framed the scope of their inquiry but, to succeed, because adroit at the political machinations of court, papal, and eventually secular society.

There were discontents to this normalization of inquiry. Alchemists blended understandings of multiple theoretical and spiritual traditions in the pursuit of solutions to spec-

ulatively enormous problems (transmutation, age, disease). The heterodoxy that alchemists relied upon was eliminated by the emphasis on quantitative experimentation, and reproducible results.

Technology, in the form of the Industrial Revolution, as an organization of social life insulated homogeneity by delivering results. Technology is best understood as a separate but related field of inquiry from Science with a field of vision further narrowed by the motivation of creating applications. The mass production of technology has never been the result of any other force than the desires of power. In terms of the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century this looked like the transformation of the social life of England into one of an urban population dominated by factories. It also involved the extraction of resources across half the globe (India being a generous source of capital for industrial England) into the control of very few.

In the name of efficiency the product is the goal not the process of discovery and examination.

What is the limitation of specialization? Questions are no longer the pursuit of technicians or philosophers, answers are. Solutions to human problems are framed in material terms along entirely different lines than the cause. Corrective lenses do not cure bad eyesight, or stop one from watching television or staring at a computer screen, but allow one to continue exactly the pursuits that eyesight is good for. This kind of leveling exemplifies the motivation of specialization. If the structure of daily life forces certain kind of behavior (for instance the ability to see books and screens) then the kind of characteristics that could develop by people without sight are left undiscovered. As daily life constrains our options further we are forced into narrower and narrow tunnels. Eventually we find that we have chosen one thing, at

the cost of every other thing, and in the name of survival.

This far

There is an active conversation among radicals and greens that begs response. The classic presentation would be a dichotomy between the allegation that technology is neutral on the one hand and that it embeds an essential 'negative' value on the other. Clearly technology is neutral only to the extent that you assume the values of the present order. If those values are not assumed then technology is not any different than history, philosophy, or science. They are the weapons that power use to fragment and control the population. One cannot understand our society without having a working, theoretical, and practical knowledge of technology and as a result most will choose to. The value of understanding our society is up for debate though.

If, following the nihilists of the 1860's, we were to advocate for a parochial skepticism then it would be enough to revolt against rent, usury, asphalt, bureaucrats and their henchmen, etc, etc. If we were to respond even further in kind it would be against the excessive aspects of our society that most resemble Czarist Russia. Our response would look like the opposite of the moral majoritarians and large government fetishists. Instead of valorizing natural science it is possible that this line of thought would lead to an ascetic ethical system along the lines of anarchists that eschew digital technology for analog. This far, and no further! would be their motto.

Ascension

Assuming that parochialism is a limitation, which is probably true in the light of the failure of revolutionary movements of the counter-culture, then what is next for contrarians. What would a universal skepticism look like

as a method of inquiry, social form, and practice? Would the nihilist practice of today look more like the obsessive scientist of *Fathers and Sons* or the paranoid murderer of *Crime and Punishment*.

If a political nihilism is a specific rejection of the world as-it-is it is still make priorities. Nihilism still has a legacy. The reason that the positive program of a Nihilism today wouldn't include a DIY naturalist science isn't just because of the implication of science having changed over the past hundred fifty years but because the very notion of a positive program has changed in the eye of radicals. Any evaluation of a nihilist program has to take into account exactly how tentative it would be. A universal skepticism runs into similar problems that a universal positivism does, who exactly does the universalizing?

We will begin, with this limitation in mind, an evaluation of three specific approaches that both overlap and are contained

within a nihilist perspective: Critique as practice, Avocation of the Deed, and Negation – as rhetoric, practice, and form.

Rhetorical negation is not the existential navel-gazing that appears indistinguishable from ennui. It is the position that political engagement with the present order is inconsequential but that articulating that political position is not. The writings of Tristan Tzara exemplify this position.

The practice of negation may very well be an artifact of the denatured intellectual environment of North America but represents the active nonactivism that confuses participation in political projects without tying them to political (and politicized) social movements as an 'armchair' activity. This is a practice without strategy, possibly done for its own reward. The activities of many anarchist reading groups qualify for the position.

Formal negation is likely the most widely held political nihilist position. It is the prac-

tice of not submitting to the aggression of the dominant order by avoiding it. The sentiment that one does not attend political protests because they do not enjoy the presence of the police or do not vote because every choice on a ballot is shit are examples of this position.

The thread that runs through all of the negation approaches is the stance of non-participation as political practice. This lends itself to the criticism of nihilism as solipsism which serves as a nice counter-point to the criticism of leftists as rhetorically self-sacrificing moralists.

Avocation of the Deed would be the most stereotypical nihilist political position. Many would-be-nihilists use the claim of strategic avocation as a shield to discuss their desires. Knocking over electrical towers and phone lines are their own reward, linking them to The Generalized Struggle for Human Emancipation™ is window dressing.

The question of sensational actions, of horrific deeds, remains a central question for radicals of all stripes.

The legacy of Propaganda by the Deed is evaluated incorrectly. On the one hand the vast majority of PbtD actions were not violent actions against capitalists, leaders, and bureaucrats but the practice of daily life. On the other there is an argument that if the revolutionary struggle was doomed to failure, due to lack of preparation and a thousand other reasons, that going out shooting (which PbtD could safely be described as) was a valid exit strategy. What were the alternatives? Life as an exile chasing every hint of Revolution like the Communards? Chasing every summit hoping for another Seattle?

Today's avocation differs from PbtD by placing the emphasis on the deed rather than the history or public relations consequence. This may entail giving up a certain kind of power, since others become the managers of

your message, as in the case of suicide bombers but the clarity of the deed speaks louder than any politician's message.

The practice of Critique entails using a suite of empirical and intellectual tools to evaluate the behavior and actions of others. It is a practice that does not stand alone but leans on others and in that way is the most social nihilist practice. The idea that nothing should stand: belief, value, or paradigm and no positive program installed in their place is at the core of the nihilist project.

Conclusion

Nihilism in the 21st century differs from that of the 19th on one important question. Rather than being a reactionary political practice resulting from a specific political context (Czarist Russia) it now draws its inspiration from an understanding of the philosophical trajectory of 20th century, the revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th,

and a sober understanding of exactly how little these well-springs offer one who would resist.

In hindsight natural science was the liberating response to a society dominated by mystical reverence for leader and God. In the absence of a simple response to today's similar and extended problems an anarchist nihilism offers a category, a frame of reference, rather than the pat answer political discourse tends to favor. Nihilists will not become black-clad boy scouts, summit hoppers, or politicize thriving off of the detritus of an excessive society. There will not be a comfort for those of us whose rejection of this society includes its opposition.

when dictionaries burn

Active Nihilism – As foretold by Raul Vaneigem in *Revolution of Everyday Life*, "There is no consciousness of transcendence without consciousness of decomposition." The active nihilist sees in the unknown future and despair at our current situation, a call to arms. An active nihilist finds energy, a will to act, in the hopelessness of the conforming, rigid, asphyxiation of our society. Meaning is found in approaching the void rather than in the false knowledge of what is on the other side of it.

Terror – The primary modality of class society, whether it is by violence, hunger, or the threat of the elements. If every object, person, and moment is for sale, if there is nothing outside, then there is abject terror. When living is a contemptible act, it is terror. What is the opposite of this?

Nihilist Anarchism – We are not drifts of snow moving through reality. Things have happened. Choices have been made. These choices can be evaluated, not from a timeless doctrine but from a human scale. By this human scale the size, the scope, of the choices made is beyond comprehension. This being the case, and as the desire of conscious bodies is to understand, a frame of reference to begin to impact the world can be based on one of two options. Either shrink the world that you desire to understand and touch or assert yourself onto a world gone mad in such a way as to transform scale. Institutions, ideologies, systems, schools, family, capital, government and revolutionary movements have all developed beyond the body. Nihilist anarchism isn't concerned with a social revolution that adds a new chapter to an old history but the ending of history

altogether. If not revolutionaries then possibly epochanaries, for the transformation of society without a positive program.

Philosophical Nihilism – The answer to the existential question about what is knowable is, nothing.

Passive Nihilism – If the future is unknowable we are confronted with a choice. When all we know is terror many stop making choices. People break. If you have ever been confronted by the alarm clock and just shut it off and pulled the cover over your head you know passive nihilism. The pain of resisting, of being the false opposition, or the purged, justifies a thousand no's. A million. The passive nihilist no longer has hope that their participation is necessary for the world to keep spinning.

Life – Is a terrorized body living?

Power – Hyphenated power doesn't avoid the problem that power raises but tries to shift it somewhere else. We can, do, and will continue to hurt, dominate, and manipulate one another. We are creatures of power. To the extent that we do take responsibility for this it looks like shame. This confuses power with Christianity.

Hope – This coin has two sides that can't be separated: expectation and desire.

Existential Nihilism – An existential nihilist remains at an impasse regarding a variety of core issues. If we cannot know anything then how can we make choices? When Nietzsche talked of nihilism this is what he was referring to. The trajectory of Western thought leads to unknowable questions and paralysis.

Strategic Nihilism – Revolutionary programs deserve the snickers that they get. The idea that yet another manifesto

(YAM) or mission statement or action plan is going to make the tired activism of a new generation smells less of the death it wraps around its neck is ludicrous. Strategic nihilism argues for a new approach to social transformation that resembles the burning of a field rather than building the new world within the shell of the old or one last push by the working class to seize the means of production. An approach that concerns itself with exactly what the forms of social control are and their suppression falls far astray from models of recruitment, education, progress, or the crossed fingers that the next riot will be the Big one.

Positive Program – Shorthand for a positive program for social change, a positive program is one that confuses desire with reality and extends that confusion into the future. In the case of

radicals this usually takes the form of stating programs along the lines of "ATR there will be no hunger" at worst and "The abolishment of class society will result in relations without limit" at its best. A positive program is an idealist legacy that forms the core of most revolutionary thought.

Causality – The belief that one event following another necessitates their relationship is erroneous, as posited by Hume. If causality cannot be assumed, or even accepted if argued, the efficacy of most political forms is limited, particularly as a way to transform the world.

ATR – After the Revolution

Revolution – The limited desire to change the world as modeled by the French Revolution. The Good News: Heads will roll. The Bad: The Bureaucrats win in the end.

Body – A body can be an individual. It can be a group of individuals. It can be a cultural or social unit. It can also be understood as a philosophical unit, a black box that accepts input from the world and responds in kind. It is not known but knowing.

now is the time
(and yet
we wait)

We are necessarily impatient. We can't stand paying rent one more month. Being forced from cradle to toilet to classroom to cubicle to grave makes us boring. We hate ourselves and our condition even more.

But what to do? We are not so naïve as to believe the leftist line about 'revolutionary' groups like the Weatherman. We don't accept that the problem with their strategy was a lack of mass base. We see their problem as lack of ambition.

Not only can you not bring down the castle walls by running full speed into them but it may be that this world has become sophisticated enough to no longer need castles or even physical presence to a large degree. This is the problem with most critiques of postmodernity. They assume that the postmodern would be a device used by the dispossessed in our arsenal against this world. This is not the case. What is the case is that the postmodern (and its accompanying

condition) is yet another tool in the arsenal of this order. Postmodernism is the terrain upon which this order's current travels can be mapped. This can particularly be seen in discussions of virtuality, identity, and the politics of deconstruction (as relevant tenure track pursuit and little else).

The first premise of postmodernism is that there are no 'meta' narratives. There is no single history or anthropology or system that enables us to know the real. While this is great news if you're sick of the blowhard Marxist and Republican orators of the workers' or entrepreneurs' Coming Emancipation, it also leaves us very alone. On the one hand we now have a language to understand that every truth coming out of the mouth of our leaders, teachers, and specialists is suspect but on the other we are no longer presented with a Golden Brick Road towards the world of our desires.

The group who is best prepared to take

advantage of this information is not the group with nothing to lose but the group with the most resources to bring to bear. If we are no longer interested in combining ourselves with others into shapes that can be placed on the board of politics and business, then those who do can have the board to themselves. They understand that the postmodern condition keeps us apart. Alone. They have trained us to believe in nothing AND to accept the conditions of this world as universal.

The second premise builds on the first. If history is no longer a 'true' story (in the grand epic sense that Western Civilization classes or Marxists speak of), then progress is no longer that story extended into the future.

If progress is no longer assumed on the world stage it may be that it wasn't the right mechanism (or meta-narrative) to understand the material world, humans' role in it, or much of anything at all. Where does that

leave evolution? Isn't evolution just an idealist-materialist 'proof ' of progress in biological systems?

If we abandon progressive notions then we should, it would stand to reason (sic), abandon inclinations toward democratic institution building (as a partial step towards what we want), including participation in humanizing such institutions. Instead we are informed by the specialists of knowledge, if we don't accept the progress modality, that we are at 'the end of history' where the present conditions are universal, fixed, and unconditional. This is another example of those who control ideology planting their value system onto the space burnt out by the postmodern controlled fire.

Another premise of postmodernism is that culture is the means of social transformation in a media rich world. This is mostly a rhetorical device alluding to something obvious (if you accept the premise). If the

world is indeed media rich, cybernetic, illusory, and entirely without mooring on the foundations of the 19th century, including 19th century prejudices about labor and progress, then engaging with it must be in this new vocabulary. If you do not accept this, if you recognize it as a tragic misreading of Debord, most of the consequences of thinking of culture-as–transformative-lever can be seen as based on a faulty premise.

This is how postmodernism works. It takes a premise, let's say that "Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (Debord) and turn it around "Representation is everything directly lived" and you have a clear argument for non-engagement. Why bother living in time and space? If life is merely representation then media is living on a greater scale than would be otherwise possible.

I recently attended a speech where one of the questions asked of the presenter, who was

arguing against representation generally, went along these lines. "I am a computer graphics student and I have spent long days precisely measuring and evaluating a blade of grass with the goal of reproducing the form within the computer environment. How can you say that my work, both in the observing and the reproducing, is wrong?" This is a classic example of accepting the premise and basing, in this case, an entire career and life path on it. If we live in a media environment then oh, what a time savings that I myself do not have to go to a field to experience something called field. Instead I can download the Field Experience volume 1 and know field. Who are you to tell me differently? Do you have ownership of the concept of field that you would lord over me?

The point being made here is simply this: abandonment of understanding the mechanisms of control disarms us. In the case of postmodernism, confusing a set of

academics with the actual power brokers who enact their ideas is a paralyzing problem.

What's next then? If there are no castle walls because domination has found a way to succeed without necessarily materializing, then our project no longer looks like a siege. If virtualization has become part and parcel of the dominance matrix then single points of attack are no longer effective. There is no letter bomb large enough.

The simple answer is that we have to be patient. We have to have an engaged patience that is incomprehensible to the lethargy of the revolutionary left. Our role should not be to lay in wait for some mark to come stumbling along because that is never going to happen. Instead we must have total engagement in the social and political processes around us. Nothing should escape our attention. This could look like, and is not limited to, attending church (especially politically active churches), going to

shareholder meetings, attending city council, toasters, Elks lodges, civic organizations and even leftist meetings. The idea is not that our efforts should be particularly supportive or even destructive to these groups (although pushing the boundary in both directions should be part of the process) but to understand how it is that modern acculturated civil society works. What does a social group look like and how does it react to the kind of stimulus that can be brought to bear? If you play the game how easy is it to integrate into an organizational form? To what extent do these forms accrue power, negligence, and momentum? We need more information.

Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21st Century
&
Anarchy and Nihilism: Consequences

Here are compiled two pamphlets that introduced for a modern anarchist audience the relevance of nihilism, and the historic connections and disconnections between nihilism and anarchy.
Especially because *nihilism* is a word that is gaining notoriety and credence in some anarchist circles, it is also (much like the word *anarchy*) used in widely disparate ways.
Is nihilism a hatred of everything? a hatred of everything that currently exists? a complete rejection of hope? or only of Hope™?

$4

pistols drawn.